

**United States Department of the Interior  
Heritage Conservation and Recreation Service**

**National Register of Historic Places  
Inventory—Nomination Form**

See instructions in *How to Complete National Register Forms*  
Type all entries—complete applicable sections

For HCRS use only

received

date entered

**1. Name**

historic LUZERNE COUNTY COURTHOUSE

and/or common

**2. Location**

street & number North River Street \_\_\_\_\_ not for publication

city, town Wilkes-Barre \_\_\_\_\_ vicinity of \_\_\_\_\_ congressional district 11

state Pennsylvania code 42 county Luzerne code 079

**3. Classification**

<b>Category</b>	<b>Ownership</b>	<b>Status</b>	<b>Present Use</b>
____ district	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> public	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> occupied	____ agriculture
<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> building(s)	____ private	____ unoccupied	____ commercial
____ structure	____ both	____ work in progress	____ educational
____ site	<b>Public Acquisition</b>	<b>Accessible</b>	____ entertainment
____ object	____ in process	____ yes: restricted	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> government
	____ being considered	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> yes: unrestricted	____ industrial
		____ no	____ military
			____ other:

**4. Owner of Property**

name Luzerne County, c/o County Commissioners

street & number Courthouse, North River Street

city, town Wilkes-Barre \_\_\_\_\_ vicinity of \_\_\_\_\_ state Pennsylvania 18700

**5. Location of Legal Description**

courthouse, registry of deeds, etc. Luzerne County Courthouse

street & number North River Street

city, town Wilkes-Barre \_\_\_\_\_ state Pennsylvania

**6. Representation in Existing Surveys**

title Pennsylvania Inventory  
of Historic Places

has this property been determined eligible? \_\_\_\_ yes \_\_\_\_ no

date \_\_\_\_\_ federal ☒ state \_\_\_\_ county \_\_\_\_ local

depository for survey records Pennsylvania Historical & Museum Commission

city, town Harrisburg \_\_\_\_\_ state Pennsylvania

## 7. Description

### Condition

☐ excellent  
☒ good  
☐ fair

☐ deteriorated  
☐ ruins  
☐ unexposed

### Check one

☐ unaltered  
☒ altered

### Check one

☒ original site  
☐ moved date \_\_\_\_\_

### Describe the present and original (if known) physical appearance

It is located in the Fourth Ward of the City of Wilkes-Barre, on a plot of ground containing about four acres, which was formerly a part of the River Common. The plot is bounded by River Street, North Street, and the right-of-way of the Pennsylvania and New York Canal and Railroad Company, a part of which is now occupied by the Lackawanna and Wyoming Valley Railroad. A few hundred feet beyond the railroad, and in plain view from the building, flows the majestic Susquehanna.

A neat and substantial cut-stone retaining wall surrounds the lot, with the exception of the River Street side, which is graded to a level with the street; and the spacious grounds not occupied by the building have been beautified by grading and the planting of trees, shrubbery, and flowers.

The total cost of the building and its furnishings, together with the grounds, was approximately 2 million dollars; an although grand in all its appointments, and far exceeding the original estimated cost, but few persons may now be found to say that it is too great, or too good, for a county of great wealth, area, population and business as that of Luzerne; while it is evident that the great majority of well-informed citizens look upon the magnificent two million dollar structure, its decorations and furnishings, in all their beauty and usefulness, with pride and admiration, confidently believing that full value has been received by the County of Luzerne for all the moneys expended.

The plan of the building is cruciform, the length of each axis being 200'. The rotunda at the intersection of the axes is 53 x 53 feet, and terminates vertically with the dome, the base of which is 100' above the first floor. The various offices and court rooms open off the corridor and gallery encircling the rotunda.

The foundations are of concrete, the exterior walls of Ohio sandstone, the floors, roofs and dome are of reinforced concrete, and the roof coverings of terra-cotta. With the exception of the dome, the tiles are nailed to porous brick set in the concrete roofs.

The entire rotunda, including the arches of the penetrations under the dome, is finished with marble. The four piers supporting the dome and the rusticated walls of the first story are of Botticino stone, a buff-colored marble resembling Caen stone in color. The cornices, columns, balustrades and corridor wainscoting are of white Italian marble, and the wainscoting base of Alps green. Statuary finish bronze has been used effectively in the marble cornice of the second story, and in the marble balustrades of the second floor gallery and main stairway. The elevator enclosures, electroliers and office screens are also of cast bronze. The floors throughout, with the exception of some of the smaller offices, are of Tennessee marble, those of the corridors, gallery and rotunda being laid in patterns.

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The interior of the dome is executed in plaster and is colored with the prevailing tone of the Botticino stone. The panels are retta-verte, with such portraits and emblems as are used, painted as cameos. Gold leaf is used on the mouldings. The pendentives are painted with figures on mosaic backgrounds.

The vaulted ceilings of the rotunda corridor and entrance corridors are treated with mosaics, the pendentives of the vaults having painted portraits of various people prominently connected with the history of the county. The lunettes along the corridor walls which adjoin the mosaic vaults are painted with subjects apropos of the early settlement of the Wyoming Valley.

There are 5 court rooms, 4 of which are located on the 3rd floor; the fifth, or Orphans' Court room, being on the second floor. The third floor court rooms are similar in design; two are finished in mahogany and two in Circassian walnut. The judges' chambers adjoin the court rooms and are similarly treated. The court room floors are covered with rubber tiling, the draperies are of Orsini silk velour and the electroliers of brass, gold plated. Each of the third floor court rooms is embellished with a notable mural painting over the judges' bench: "Justice," "Prosperity Under the Law," "The Judicial Virtues," and "The Awakening of a Commonwealth," having been executed by Messrs. Edwin H. Blashfield, Will H. Low, Kenyon Cox and William T. Smedley, respectively.

The Orphans' Court room is wainscoted with English veined white Italian marble in the form of panels, with stiles and rails of Blanco P. The columns are of Breche violette, the woodwork of Mahogany. This room is also decorated with a mural painting, similarly located to those in the other rooms; the work of Charles L. Hinton, entitled "The Symbols of Life."

The Law Library, stack room and Bar Association room occupy the south wing of the second floor, and are finished in dark oak. The base and fireplace faces in the Law Library are of Numidian marble.

Special care was taken to have the furnishings of the building take their logical position as a part of the various rooms. Special drawings and specifications were made for all furniture, rugs, draperies, etc.

## 8. Significance

Period	Areas of Significance—Check and justify below			
<input type="checkbox"/> prehistoric	<input type="checkbox"/> archeology-prehistoric	<input type="checkbox"/> community planning	<input type="checkbox"/> landscape architecture	<input type="checkbox"/> religion
<input type="checkbox"/> 1400-1499	<input type="checkbox"/> archeology-historic	<input type="checkbox"/> conservation	<input type="checkbox"/> law	<input type="checkbox"/> science
<input type="checkbox"/> 1500-1599	<input type="checkbox"/> agriculture	<input type="checkbox"/> economics	<input type="checkbox"/> literature	<input type="checkbox"/> sculpture
<input type="checkbox"/> 1600-1699	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> architecture	<input type="checkbox"/> education	<input type="checkbox"/> military	<input type="checkbox"/> social/
<input type="checkbox"/> 1700-1799	<input type="checkbox"/> art	<input type="checkbox"/> engineering	<input type="checkbox"/> music	<input type="checkbox"/> humanitarian
<input type="checkbox"/> 1800-1899	<input type="checkbox"/> commerce	<input type="checkbox"/> exploration/settlement	<input type="checkbox"/> philosophy	<input type="checkbox"/> theater
<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> 1900-	<input type="checkbox"/> communications	<input type="checkbox"/> industry	<input type="checkbox"/> politics/government	<input type="checkbox"/> transportation
		<input type="checkbox"/> invention		<input type="checkbox"/> other (specify)

Specific dates 1905-1909

Builder/Architect

### Statement of Significance (in one paragraph)

Architect: F.J. Osterling, of McCormick & French, Pittsburgh  
Builder : Wilson J. Smith, Wilkes-Barre

Designed by F. J. Osterling in the neo-Classical style, the present cruciform shaped building is the fourth courthouse for the County of Luzerne. Its styling and detailed decorations place this structure among the most ornate of Pennsylvania's county courthouses.

Frederick J. Osterling was an important Pennsylvania architect of the late 19th and early 20th centuries. Most of the buildings attributed to Osterling are located in Allegheny County. Some of his most noted buildings include, the Union Trust Building (1915-16) Pittsburgh; 1909 wing, Allegheny County Courthouse and Jail; Fort Pitt Federal Building (1890), Pittsburgh; Iroquois Apartment House (1901-03), Pittsburgh; and the Washington County Courthouse (1900) Washington.

The public building is an index to the civic character of the people to whom it belongs. A grand and imposing structure, in keeping with the wealth and importance of the community, indicates a progressive and public-spirited people; all of which is complimentary of Luzerne County.

At the beginning of its history, the territory now comprising Luzerne County belonged to Northampton County; but in 1772, when Northumberland County was formed, it became a part of the latter county. In 1776, under the jurisdiction and claim of Connecticut, it was organized as Westmoreland County. In 1786, after the establishment of Pennsylvania's claim to the disputed territory, Luzerne County was formed from Northumberland.

The question of building the present court house began to be agitated by the people of Luzerne County more than 75 years ago. The old one had not been built more than 30 years; but the rapid increase of population and public business had demonstrated to those having business in the building that it was becoming entirely too small to answer its purpose much longer, notwithstanding the fact that subsequent to its erection territory and population enough for another good sized county had been taken from Luzerne.

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At the time it was built it was amply sufficient in size and capacity for the transaction therein of the official and legal business of the county, and it was considered a model building from an architectural standpoint, and as nearly perfect in its interior arrangement and equipment as a courthouse could be constructed.

When the division of the county took place in 1878 no one would have predicted that 10 years hence the erection of a new courthouse would be advocated, or even thought of, by the citizens of Luzerne County. But in these ten years the population of the county increased until it regained what it had lost by the division, and its business and wealth increased in a still greater proportion; and it was argued by those favoring the project that if the people desired to keep up with the times, and maintain their reputation for progressiveness, they must have a new and modern public building; that the vast mineral wealth of the county, the anthracite coal, was rapidly becoming exhausted, and that from this source of great wealth should come a large share of the cost of a new building.

As is usually the case when an enterprise of this character and extent is suggested, there was considerable opposition to the project. There were some who declared that a new building was wholly unnecessary; that the old one was good for many years to come, and equal to all requirements; and if not, that it could be made so by alterations and additions, at moderate expense.

But the question would not drop, and after a few years' agitation the matter was brought before the grand jury at the January sessions, 1894, and that body made the following report:

That the present courthouse does not afford proper and suitable offices for the accommodation and proper transaction of the public business, that there is no suitable controller's office, no superintendent's office, unsuitable water closets and inconvenient arrangements of the court rooms, and that nearly all the rooms are too small for the purpose intended.

That the grand jury recommend that the county commissioners of the county of Luzerne cause to be erected in the city of Wilkes-Barre a new courthouse suitable for the accommodation of the courts and the several officers of the county and for the reception and safe keeping of the records and other papers in charge of such officers; that further repairs to the present courthouse are in the opinion of the grand jury inadvisable, and that the erection of a new and suitable fire-proof building as hereinbefore recommended is the best economy under the circumstances.

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The succeeding grand jury, on April 7, 1894, made identically the same report and both of them having been approved by the court, the county commissioners, Messrs. Thomas Smith, P. T. Norton and Thomas M. Dullard, at once secured an option on what is known as the Ross property on South Main Street, and the Flick lot adjoining it, as a site for the erection of a new courthouse. The size of this plot of ground was 296' on Main Street and 240' deep, and the price to be paid \$83,050. On the 31st of August, 1894, this resolution was passed:

Resolved, that in accordance with the recommendation of the two successive grand juries and the approval of the court, the county commissioners hereby accept the proposition of Mr. Charles A. Miner, representing the Ross estate, and Liddon Flick, representing the estate of Reuben J. Flick, the terms of payment to be hereafter determined; and it is further

Resolved, that the county solicitor be instructed to prepare at once a brief of title of the two above mentioned properties and submit the same to the commissioners.

On the 22nd of February, 1895, the commissioners entered into a contract with Elijah E. Myers, an architect from Detroit, Mich., for the furnishing of plans and specifications for a "new fire-proof courthouse," to be erected upon the site named in the former resolution, viz: on South Main Street in the city of Wilkes-Barre.

The plans and specifications were prepared by Mr. Myers, and proposals invited by advertisement for the erection of the building in accordance therewith.

But here litigation began. An injunction was sought to restrain the commissioners from purchasing a site for the new building. The citizens who were back of this movement were not all of them opposed to the erection of a new building and still contended that the old one could be repaired and made to answer all purposes for many years.

The commissioners at once realized that they were at the beginning of a long drawn out legal dispute if they persisted in carrying out their proposition of purchasing a site, and they therefore abandoned the idea, and after opening the several proposals submitted for the erection of the building they passed the following resolution:

Resolved, that the board of county commissioners consider that none of the bids received are satisfactory, and we therefore reject each and all of them.

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Following this the injunction proceedings were dropped.

The commissioners then decided to build on Public Square, but on the 3rd of March, 1896, an injunction was again asked for to restrain them from building here; the cause of complaint being that the county had no right or title to the ground for the purpose of erecting a new building thereon.

The local court refused the injunction, and an appeal was taken to the Supreme Court, where the decree of the lower court was affirmed the 19th of June, 1896. Nothing more came of this attempt to build, but architect Myers subsequently brought suit against the county in the U.S. District Court for certain commissions and recovered judgement for \$20,000 and interest, which was paid to him in addition to \$10,000 which had been paid upon acceptance of his plans.

The next move in this matter was made on the 23rd of September, 1898, when County Commissioners A. D. Hay, John M. Jones and John Guiney passed the following resolution:

Resolved, that in compliance with and in obedience to the suggestions of the grand jury at several sessions prior hereto, we will proceed to build a new and enlarged courthouse of sufficient size to accommodate the county, upon the location of the present courthouse on the Public Square of the city of Wilkes-Barre.

And on the 13th day of January, 1899, a resolution was passed:

That we notify the several architects of Luzerne County by advertisement and five non-residents of the county by a personal invitation to submit finished plans and specifications for the proposed new courthouse.

A resolution was at the same time passed which provided certain rules and regulations to govern the architects in their work. The plans were to be submitted on or before the 15th of March, 1899, at noon. Each set of plans was to be numbered, and no mark of any kind was to be placed thereon by which the identity of the architect submitting them could be ascertained.

On the 6th of April, 1899, the commissioners selected the plans numbered 22, which were those submitted by F. J. Osterling of Pittsburgh.

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But an injunction was now sought to restrain the commissioners from erecting a new courthouse on Public Square for the reason that the recommendation of the grand jury had not been obtained, and that a site could not be legally selected without such recommendation. The injunction was made perpetual by the local court, and the decree was affirmed by the Supreme Court on the 17th of July, 1900.

In the meantime the River Common site was favored by many, and the grand jury also recommended the erection of the courthouse thereon. The City Council had agreed to exchange this site for Public Square, and the commissioners had ordered the architect to revise his plans to conform to this location. On the 16th of March, 1901, the board (now Messrs. Hay, Jones and Finn) took the following action:

Resolved, that the plans and accompanying specifications prepared by F. J. Osterling, architect, for a new courthouse for Luzerne County, to be erected on the River Common site, near corner of North River and North Streets, Wilkes-Barre, Pa., are hereby adopted and approved.

An injunction had been issued on the 23rd of November 1900, to restrain the commissioners from building on the River Common site, and at this time had not been disposed of; but in 1902 the injunction was dissolved, an appeal taken to the Supreme Court, and the decree of the lower court affirmed.

On the 3rd of May, 1902, the commissioners took this action:

Whereas, By ordinance of the city of Wilkes-Barre and acceptance thereof by the county, the county has acquired the right to erect, construct and maintain a new courthouse on the River Common site, at corner of North River, and North Streets in the city of Wilkes-Barre, Pa., and

Whereas, the right to so occupy said site has been affirmed by the Supreme Court of this State, and

Whereas, Plans and specifications for a new courthouse on said site prepared by F. J. Osterling, Esq., architect, have been adopted by the county commissioners and approved by the judges of the Court of Common Pleas, and

Whereas, The right of the county to proceed with the erection of said building is now clear; there be it



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Resolved, First, That we proceed forthwith to erect a new courthouse on the site above specified and according to the plans and specifications above specified.

Second, That the county controller advertise according to law, beginning May 5, 1902, for bids for the erection of said courthouse, in which advertisement he shall state,

First, Bids to close Wednesday, May 28, 1902, at 12 o'clock noon.

Second, Plans, specifications and forms of contract to be entered into, to be open for inspection and examination of bidders in jury room #1, over law library, in present courthouse, between the hours of 9 a.m. and 4:30 p.m. from May 5, 1902, to close of bidding.

Third, Each bid to be made on form prepared and furnished by county commissioners on request, and to be accompanied by a certified check or surety company bond of \$25,000 as a guaranty that the bidder will enter into contract if the same be awarded to him.

Fourth, if the person to whom the contract may be awarded shall refuse or fail to enter into contract and furnish the required building bond within one week after notice to do so, his bid will be rejected and the other bids considered and the contract awarded.

Fifth, All bids to be binding upon the bidders until contract is executed.

For some reason the order to advertise was revoked and another resolution was passed on the 21st of June, 1902, directing the county controller to "advertise for proposals for the construction and erection of the new courthouse under the revised plans, the same to be submitted on or before the 23rd of July, 1902, at 12 o'clock."

The controller advertised in accordance with the resolution, and on the 23rd of July at 2 o'clock p.m., the proposals submitted were opened, and the contract for the erection of the building was awarded to the Joseph Hendler Construction Company of Wilkes-Barre, for the sum of \$597,000, this being the lowest bid.

On the 31st of July the commissioners granted permission to the Joseph Hendler Construction Company to withdraw their bid, and the contract was awarded to Wilson J. Smith of Wilkes-Barre for the sum of \$617,000; the material to consist of Ohio liver rock sandstone. This contract included only a bare building and that without the dome, which was subsequently given to Mr. Smith to construct for the sum of \$65,000.

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And now comes another injunction. On the 2nd of August, 1902, certain citizens of Wilkes-Barre asked the court to restrain the commissioners and Mr. Smith from proceeding under the contract which had been executed on the 31st of July, for the reason that it did not call for a completed building, and for other reasons stated in the petition to the court. The injunction was continued until the 9th of March, 1903, when it was dissolved by the court, the contract approved and the decree signed by all the judges.

Mr. Smith now entered upon the work of carrying out his contract, but the progress made during the next 2½ years was very slow, and on the 10th of October, 1905, he executed a power of attorney, constituting the Carlucci Stone Company of Scranton, Pa., his attorney-in-fact to complete a part of the work which he had undertaken. This arrangement had been agreed to by the board of commissioners, then consisting of Messrs. Jacob Schappert, Patrick Finn and Thomas Smith, who had taken office the first Monday of January, 1903.

On the first of January, 1906, a new board of county commissioners, viz: George Smith, Walter M. McAvoy and Silas E. Jones, entered upon the duties of the office, and on the 23rd of January contracted with McCormick and French, architects, of Wilkes-Barre, for the furnishing of plans and specifications for the interior, and for the supervision of the construction of the entire building; the foundation and a portion of the first story walls having been laid previous to that time. All additional plans and specifications, including those for the furniture, furnishings, and etc., were made by McCormick and French.

The work was now commenced in real earnest; and although disputes and controversies arose from time to time, rendering progress exceedingly difficult, it was persistently and determinedly continued until the final completion and occupation of the building on the first of June, 1909; all of the records having been transferred from the old courthouse at that time. Thus it will be observed that at the time of its completion more than 15 years had elapsed since the first grand jury recommended the building of a new courthouse; although the work of constructing and furnishing the same was mostly accomplished during the last three years, the cornerstone having been laid April 5th, 1906.

Whenever it could consistently be done contracts were awarded to local bidders, of whom the following individuals and firms secured contracts and had part in the construction and furnishing of the building, viz:

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Wilson J. Smith - stone and iron work, fire-proofing and wood finishing.

Cooke Bros., -. concrete flooring and walks

Weiss &amp; Jones - heating and ventilating, also grading grounds

E. F. Roth, generators, wiring, etc.

Voorhis &amp; Murray, furniture

Jonas Long's Sons, Austrian rugs

Williams &amp; McAnulty - draperies, window shades, rubber matting, etc.

Others having contracts were:Carlucci Stone Company - marble, ornamental plaster, bronze, and  
cabinet woodwork, metal furniture, also retaining wall

Otis Elevator Company - elevators

Enos Company - electrical fixtures

Messrs. Kenyon Cox, Edwin H. Blashfield, Will H. Low and William  
T. Smedley, mural paintings.

## 9. Major Bibliographical References

Pearce. The Annals of Luzerne County. 1866, p. 252-59, 244.

Robinson, R. P. Luzerne County Courthouse. Wilkes-Barre, 1912.

History Luzerne County Courthouse. Luzerne County Commissioners.

## 10. Geographical Data

Acreage of nominated property 4

Quadrangle name / Kingston, Pa.

Quadrangle scale 1:24,000

### UMT References

A 118 42163120 4156168120  
Zone Easting Northing

B                    
Zone Easting Northing

C                  

D                  

E                  

F                  

G                  

H                  

**Verbal boundary description and justification** Bounded by River Street, North Street, and the right-of-way of the Pennsylvania and New York Canal and Railroad Company.

### List all states and counties for properties overlapping state or county boundaries

state	code	county	code
state	code	county	code

## 11. Form Prepared By

name/title Gary F. Lamont, Director

organization Office of Community Development date

street & number Luzerne County Courthouse telephone

city or town Wilkes-Barre state Pennsylvania 18711

## 12. State Historic Preservation Officer Certification

The evaluated significance of this property within the state is:

☐ national ☐ state ☒ local

As the designated State Historic Preservation Officer for the National Historic Preservation Act of 1966 (Public Law 89-665), I hereby nominate this property for inclusion in the National Register and certify that it has been evaluated according to the criteria and procedures set forth by the Heritage Conservation and Recreation Service.

### State Historic Preservation Officer signature

Ed Weintraub, Director  
title Office of Historic Preservation date

### For HCRS use only

I hereby certify that this property is included in the National Register

date

Keeper of the National Register

Attest:

date

Chief of Registration

## 9. Major Bibliographical References

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Quadrangle scale 1:24,000

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A 18 42163120 45668120  
Zone Easting Northing

B                    
Zone Easting Northing

C                  

D                  

E                  

F                  

G                  

H                  

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state    code    county    code   

state    code    county    code   

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State Historic Preservation Officer signature

Ed Weintraub, Director  
title Office of Historic Preservation

date 6/24/80

For HCRRS use only

I hereby certify that this property is included in the National Register

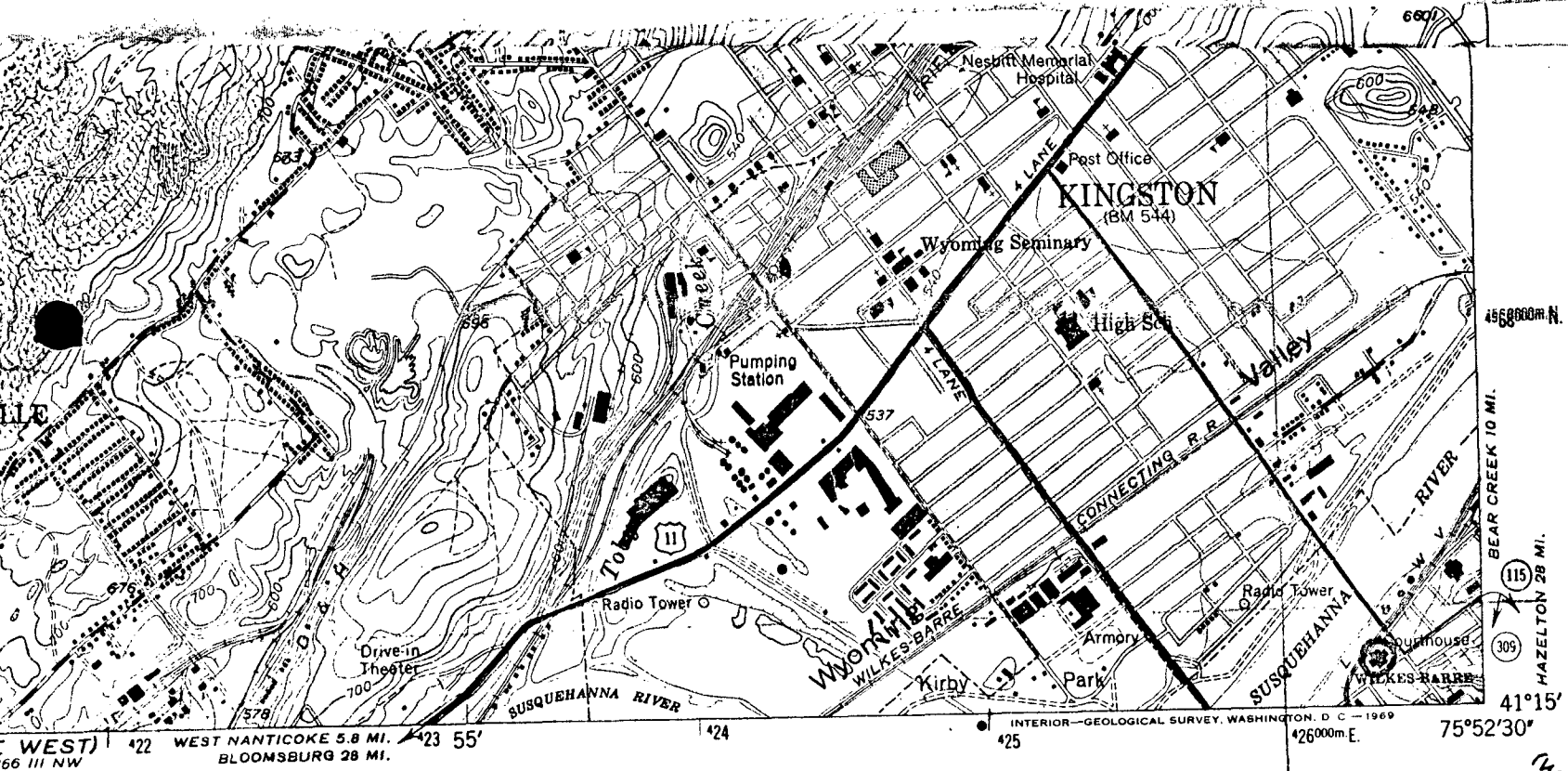
date   

Keeper of the National Register

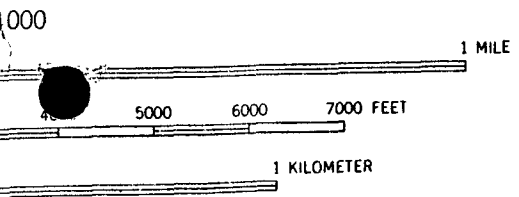
Attest:

date   

Chief of Registration

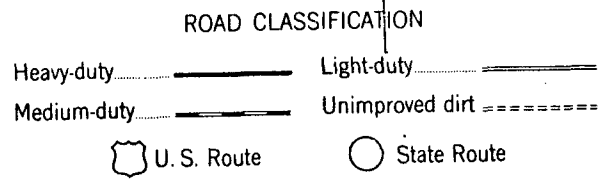
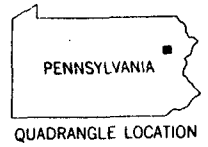


WEST) 422 WEST NANTICOKE 5.8 MI. 423 55' 424  
66 III NW BLOOMSBURG 28 MI.



AL 20 FEET  
SEA LEVEL

L MAP ACCURACY STANDARDS  
RVEY, WASHINGTON, D. C. 20242  
ND SYMBOLS IS AVAILABLE ON REQUEST



4568000m N.  
BEAR CREEK 10 MI.  
115  
309  
HAZELTON 28 MI.  
41°15'  
75°52'30"  
426000m E.

KINGSTON, PA.  
N4115-W7552.5/7.5

1946  
PHOTOREVISED 1969  
AMS 5866 IV SW-SERIES V831

Courthouses of Pennsylvania  
Thematic Resources  
Luzerne County Courthouse  
Luzerne County  
Zone 18 E426320 N4566820

(WILKES-BARRE EAST)  
5866 III NE